

The Chamberlen obstetrical instruments^{*}

Joseph T. Smith, M. D.

WE read of dynasties of Pharaohs, of Caesars, of Tudors. Yet royal blood is not the only blood that has produced great families that have influenced history. Even medicine can show such dynasties—the Greek (dynastes) means “Lords: Strong Men.” A notable gift to the Museum of the Cleveland Medical Library draws our attention to one of the most dramatic and lengthy families of this kind: a dynasty of medical men consisting of eight individuals, spread over five generations, through a period of about 150 years: a dynasty that gave the medical world a gift that never can be forgotten while children are born,—the obstetric forceps.

In the middle of the 16th century, Huguenot doctors were not permitted to treat Catholic patients in France. It was feared that they would not give warning of approaching death in time to call a priest for the final ritual of the church. So, in 1569, William Chamberlen, a staunch Protestant, migrated from France to England. Thus, the Lord made the wrath of man to serve him; for, had William remained in France, he would undoubtedly have perished in the Saint Bartholomew Massacre, which occurred a very short time after his migration.

William had two sons; one born before the family left France, the other in England. Much confusion has arisen from the fact that both the sons became barber-surgeons in England, and both were named Peter.

The migrations forced by the World War have shown us that the expatriates do not at once step into positions of prominence in their new homes. Are Christians from ruined Damascus the leading men of Athens today? Are exiled Russian nobles the chiefs in Paris? Yet by 1614, we find Peter (the Elder) Chamberlen delivering the Queen of James I; and later he attended Henrietta Maria, Queen of Charles I. For this patient, Peter received a fee of 600 pounds (no inconsiderable fee for those times).

The younger brother, Peter, like the elder one, was in frequent conflict with the

College of Physicians because, although a mere surgeon, he would prescribe drugs. The brothers long strove to have the London midwives organized into a College, of which the elder Peter hoped to be the head. The title of his pamphlet urging this action is certainly flamboyant:

“A VOICE IN RAMAH, OR THE CRY OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN, AS ECHOED FORTH IN THE COMPASSION OF PETER CHAMBERLEN.”

So Peter (the Younger) saw to it that his son, also a Peter, should not be a mere surgeon, but should attain the real dignity of becoming a full-fledged physician, a member of the London College. Therefore, this son is known in history as “Doctor Peter”—the third generation of our dynasty. Dr. Peter became famous all over England as an obstetrician; and he, too, tried in vain to become head of a College of midwives that he sought to establish. This is the man who bought Mortimer Hall, in Essex, to which we shall refer later.

Dr. Peter Chamberlen had three sons who were noted obstetricians; Hugh, Paul and John. All three were possessed of the family secret that made the clan pre-eminent among English accoucheurs. Hugh returned to the ancestral home, France; and offered to sell the family secret to Mauriceau.

He failed to impress the Frenchman, because the wonderful secret did not enable him to deliver a poor rachitic dwarf, with an impossibly small pelvis. Mauriceau was even more displeased when Hugh translated the Frenchman's excellent treatise on obstetrics into English, and profited from the sale of what we should call a pirated edition that became very popular in England.

Hugh's son, also named Hugh, continued the use of the family secret. He finally sold the device to the Medico-Pharmaceutical College, of Amsterdam. Was the deal a fraud? It is related that the College received only one blade. Hugh, Junior, died in 1728; yet the forceps secret was certainly out by 1728.

We condemn the Chamberlens for making a secret of their discovery of an instrument

^{*}Remarks on the presentation of replicas of these instruments at the meeting of the Cleveland Medical Library Association, April 17, 1931.

capable of relieving much human suffering—the obstetric forceps. Most unethical, according to modern ideas. However, if we are charitable, we must remember that standards change with time. All 16th century physicians had their secrets. A doctor was respected in proportion to the number of secret formulae and ideas of treatment he had developed, and nobody expected such secrets to be made public property. Such names as Fowler's Solution and Dover's Powder illustrate this proprietary right a doctor had in his discovery.

In 1813, Mrs. Kembell was living in that old house in Essex which Dr. Peter Chamberlen had bought before 1638. In a secret closet, she discovered a trunk containing primitive forceps. These now lie in the Museum of the Royal Society of Medicine, London. During a recent visit, they were seen by Dr. Howard Dittrick, who applied for replicas of these real Chamberlen forceps. Not merely was his request granted, but Dr. Henry S. Wellcome, an honorary member of the London Society, had the replicas made,

and has presented them to our Museum as his gift.

The most primitive forcep was probably the invention of Peter Chamberlen, the Elder son of William. Why else did he rise so high and so soon in English obstetrics as to have queens for his patients? It is true that obstetrical forceps had been foreshadowed by the Arabs—by Avicenna and Albucasis. Yet their instruments seem able only to extract a dismembered foetus. The famous picture of Rueff (1554) is difficult to judge because we do not know the scale in which it is drawn, so we cannot tell its size. However, the statement that it shows a forceps that may also be used for stones makes it evident that the instrument could be employed only after embryotomy.

The real feature of the Chamberlen forceps that made their idea practical and valuable is the fact that the blades may be disarticulated. That apparent trifle made the difference between success and failure. The Chamberlen forceps have the cephalic curve only. Smellie added the pelvic curve in 1751.

Chamberlen Family Tree

William (migrated 1569.d.1596)

Peter (Elder) (b. before migration.d.1631)

Peter (Younger) (b.1572.d.1626)

Dr. Peter (b.1601.d.1683)

Hugh (b. c1630.d?)

Paul (b.1635.d.1717)

John (b.? d.1700)

Hugh (b.1664.d.1728)

Radiologists elect

The Cleveland Radiological Society held its last meeting of the year at the University Club, Monday, April 27th. The Detroit, Toledo and Buffalo Radiological societies were its guests at dinner and their members gave the program as follows:

"Roentgen Findings in Chloroma" by Dr. H. P. Doub of Detroit.

"Roentgen Treatment of Testicular Tumors" by Dr. J. R. Murphy of Toledo.

"Bone Tumors" by Dr. J. M. Barnes of Buffalo.

Election of officers resulted as follows: Dr. Abraham Strauss, president to succeed Dr. Harry Farmer, and Dr. Merthyn Thomas,

secretary-treasurer to succeed Dr. A. Strauss.

The Society will resume its meetings at the rooms of the Chamber of Commerce on the fourth Monday in October.

At the April meeting of the Cleveland Ophthalmological Club, Dr. Jonas S. Friedenwald, Associate Professor at the Wilmer Institute of the Johns Hopkins University Medical School and Hospital, presented a constructive and interesting paper on "The Blood Vessels in Arteriosclerosis and Hypertension."

* * * *

Dr. W. H. Humiston returned last month from his winter home in Florida.

